Cross/Bite

I was born into this world sideways.

Doctor said,
surgery, to break my face
set it right again
as if breaking were simple.

Wet places my lips have been:
all the boys I’ve kissed—
so many caves I’ve licked
saliva & sweat
holly water on my tongue.

I grind my teeth at night
wake to white sand in my mouth:
nocturnal silt, gritty loam.

My jaws pop when I talk
but if I had the surgery, went cosmetic?

Oh, the typewriter in my bones—
yes, I would miss that click/clack the most.
Cottonmouth

The man’s mouth unhinged.

He said I broke my jaw
and it open likes this now.

I heard the wet click
of little bones unfastening.

~

I woke up before anyone else
and walked outside barefoot
to the chilled porch still slick
with a thin layer of morning dew.

There was a little coral snake
asleep, coiled by a rocking chair.

I wasn’t afraid this time.

~

We were told the snake
was the most beautiful thing
God created until the snake
wanted to be God or like a god
or godlike. I’m not sure now.
It happened again—the same dream.

I have seen three women give birth and with each contraction the mighty hips break and stretch, the leathery mouth of a snake.

I watched as they writhed inside the all-consuming pain, pure as God, fists clenched, wailing something not quite human, but animal enough.

Once, she dreamt she swallowed a snake till she became the snake—looping, legless reptile, thick and aching. She woke up paralyzed until she shouted Jesus. Her arms grasping the invisible beast, blacking the dark.

The guy with the broken mouth baptized me once inside a Pentecostal
church. He said I had to be fully immersed for it to count for heaven, you know.

He said Jesus’s name only—
No trinity, just Jesus.

Then he touched me under the water.
Plucked and dripping, I came to the surface, and I shouted and they shouted. Everyone’s mouths open in praise.

~

The snake hisses like a married man.
He measured and whispered slow

You better. Get out. Of my car.

In a way that meant devour:
to swallow me whole—

crystalline sweat stippled across his forehead, his eyes, feral and glinting like two tiger eye gemstones. The street glazed with vulgar light. I felt so vulnerable when the tiny metals unlatched
from my seatbelt
breaking jangled air
with delicious clatter.

I was a *good girl* that night, he later said.

~

Lateral undulation:

We swam in the river until we saw a snake muscling
the skin of the water with mini ripples—making waves, then circles.

~

. . . *they shall lick the dust like a serpent,*
*like the crawling things of the earth . . .*

The broken jaw: Eight centimeters now :: *Push! Push!*

~

All I remember about my grandmother
is her pouf of white hair dolloped in her coffin,
a cloudy cotton boll.

I snatch the silver snakes
out of my black wool hair, a juicy Medusa.
Still, I can’t wait to be like her—all fog and forgetting.

Am I being eaten, or eating? Who can say, really?
So the dream goes something like this:

a snake slithered between my legs,
poured out my mouth—one long continuous loop—glossy glittering scales—voluminous muscle—elongated might—becoming ouroboros—my body a circle becoming samsara—entering and exiting the holy, holy O at the center of my deepening meat.

To creep, to crawl. I crawl. My mother licks the floor with her feet.

I bite John Berryman’s tail and Henry runs out of his mouth.

I crawl inside John Berryman’s mouth and manumit Henry. Now Henry is free.

Henry, you don’t have to talk like that anymore.
What if he wanted to leave
his wife and find another keeled
and granular body? His belly travels
like a snake. She believes her father
is also snake.

I have so many dark scars and purpled bruises
on my legs.

I have my mother's knees, crunchy and difficult.
Everything hurts when I'm about to go to sleep.

The snake is ready for me, shhhhh.

Every time she passes this one motel she shivers
at the things she did with her body to the man

with the mouth of a snake—all his holy,
masculine fire
consuming her—whole, she was taken.
After.

He prayed for forgiveness. Not from her. But from God. To make him able and clean again.

She is always in that room on the bed, naked like prey.

~

I’ve got two fangs in my mouth that could pierce you. My cross-bite never ground down my teeth.

I used to bite myself in my sleep, but never drew blood. I gave birth to myself—and held myself there. There.